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Bhishma's Boon: Reflections on the Complexity of Immortality

Paul Sagar¹

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Is a desire for immortality simply a desire never to die? This seems an obvious enough question, with an obvious enough answer. What could immortality be about, if not the permanent avoidance of death, and hence a desire for it simply a desire never to die?

Nonetheless, I want to claim that there is rather more to it than that. Specifically, that there is more to it even if we accept an argument famously advanced by Bernard Williams in his 'The Makropulos Case' – and recently refined and improved by Samuel Scheffler in *Death and the Afterlife* – such that when we get clear on what never dying would involve, it seems that we could not possibly want *that*.¹ Williams claims that an immortal life would be endlessly and necessarily tedious. That after a certain point the purpose of life would disappear, and continued existence would have no value or meaning. It is thus both a good thing that we are finite mortal creatures, and true of us that we should not (really) wish to be otherwise. Scheffler extends this line of argument, and claims that when we get clear on what immortality would involve, it is not only that immortality would be numbingly tedious, but that an immortal life would be no human life at all. For Scheffler, death gives the meaning to our lives. Insofar as what we value is in some sense *human* life, and given that our values attach non-contingently to our being human (and thus mortal), it would seem that on Scheffler's picture desiring immortality must ultimately be incoherent, because if we got what it is that we thought that we wanted, we would lose access to all of the values that we wanted immortality as a means to

¹ Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', in *Problems of the Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). Like Williams and Scheffler, I will assume an entirely secular perspective, such that the lives we are currently living are the only lives we will have, and that permanent biological death is the final end of each of us.

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go on enjoying. For both Williams and Scheffler, then, immortality is understood as never dying – and the upshot of their analyses strongly implies that a desire for *that* is at the very least radically misguided, and in Scheffler's case probably incoherent. It would seem to follow that a desire for immortality is something that we should straightforwardly jettison, if we find ourselves thinking that we have it.

There is of course already a lively debate around whether or not immortality – understood in terms of never dying, of somehow going on forever – would in fact be desirable. Several powerful replies to Williams and Scheffler have already been made on this score, with arguments to the effect that actually it wouldn't be so bad (and to which I am broadly sympathetic).² The aim of this paper, however, is to make an orthogonal intervention: putting aside whether or not we should want to live forever, I am here interested in whether focus on Williams's question obscures something else that is also present, and also relevant: immortality as embodying a fantasy about *control* over one's death – and thus ultimately over one's fundamental agency.

Scheffler beyond arguing that immortality is not something we ought to (or even can, coherently) desire, and identifies what he takes to be something paradoxical in our thinking about life and death more generally. He argues (correctly, it seems to me) that there is nothing irrational or unjustified in *fearing* one's own death. Yet if we also agree that death gives the meaning to our lives, this generates 'at the very least, a strange and unsettling position in which to find oneself'.³ But is this so? I want finally to suggest that our position may not be as 'strange and unsettling' as Scheffler proposes, in part because there is more to be said about what a desire for immortality might involve than either Scheffler or Williams have acknowledged. Specifically, that it may include the desire to be in control of when and how we will die, rather than simply the notion of going on forever. When we realise that this is the case, it is not so clear that a desire for immortality is something we ought straightforwardly to seek to jettison if we find that we have it.

In this section I recapitulate Williams's and Scheffler's arguments, which seem to imply that never dying is something that upon reflection we should not continue to desire, even if prior to reflection we find the notion attractive. But before doing so, it is worth noting that desiring immortality, when understood simply as the desire never to die, is already a pretty flimsy notion. For what could it mean to *never* die? As Scheffler glosses the commonplace and widespread, if at this stage largely

² See John Martin Fischer, 'Why immortality is not so bad' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 2, No. 2, (1994); Jeremy J. Wisniewski, 'Is the immortal life worth living?' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 58, No. 1, (2005); Donald W. Bruckner, 'Against the tedium of immortality', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 20, No. 5, (2012); Christopher Belshaw, 'Immortality, Memory and Imagination', *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 19, No. 3–4, (2015). It is, however, very much worth heeding Burley's warning that countering Williams's (and Scheffler's) imaginary situations with imaginary situations of one's own risks becoming merely 'a philosophers' game of trading loose speculations tenuously supported by under-described thought experiments', with the result being that it is 'difficult to see how a disagreement such as this could be resolved, not least because the arguments on both sides rest on little more than fantasizing' (Mike Burley, "'The End of Immortality!'" *Eternal Life and the Makropulos Debate*, *The Journal of Ethics* Vol. 19, No. 3–4, (2015)).

³ Scheffler, op. cit., p. 101.

unreflective, understanding of immortality, it would seem to mean 'that some version of the lives we are now leading could continue without end: an improved version, perhaps, but a recognizable version nonetheless'.⁴ But what could *that* mean, to go on *without end*? Would it mean going on after all other humans are extinct? (Presumably) When the sun has expanded and the world is a barren ball of rock incapable of supporting life? (Trickier.) When the sun has expanded to consume the earth and one would perhaps be left suspended in orbit in the vacuum of space? (This seems barely comprehensible.) When the sun has exploded? When the universe has collapsed in upon itself? (The notion seems to have fallen apart.) If immortality simply means going on *forever*, then it is a pretty unstable notion, if only because 'forever' is something we don't have any firm grip on. Thus the idea we are dealing with is not very robust, and subjecting it to even light critical pressure puts it in jeopardy. Who, after all, would desire to live *forever*, if that meant spending billions of years floating alone in the cold vacuum of space, were that somehow possible? Given the fragility of the idea of immortality understood as *never* dying, we should perhaps not be too surprised if any putative desire for it likewise comes rapidly apart.

Nonetheless, it is instructive to consider why Williams and Scheffler have given us reasons for thinking that aside from the fragility of the concept of immortality, the desire for it is anyway misguided. Williams presents immortality as necessarily leading to a state of perpetual boredom where the desire to go on living goes out of life. To this end he distinguishes between 'conditional' and 'categorical' desires. The first 'hang from the assumption of one's existence', in other words are predicated on our continuing to exist in order to continue as desires.⁵ As Scheffler renders it: if I'm going to go on living I want to have my cavity filled, but I don't want to go on living *in order* to have my cavity filled.⁶ Categorical desires are different, and do not 'hang from the assumption of one's existence'. They rather propel one forwards into wanting to keep existing. Hence: I want to see my children grow up, to finish writing my book, and to visit Fiji; these are 'categorical' desires, in that I want these things to happen, and so I want to be alive as a precondition of their being able to happen. According to Williams, it is categorical desires that give our life meaning. Without them, life would be empty and pointless.

The core of Williams's argument is that an immortal life would eventually be one in which categorical desire went away from it, and thus such a life would become pointless. Williams's gives the case of Elina Makropulos, who at 42 is given an elixir that sustains her, forever, at the biological age of 42. Yet after 300 years, EM (as Williams refers to her) is terminally bored. Her character, whilst remaining recognizably that of the same person (a necessary condition of it being *EM* who survives), has achieved everything it wanted to. Yet by staying the same person, there is no release, and nothing new can happen for one so experienced: there is no life left to live for somebody who has lost all categorical desire. As Scheffler glosses it, this eternal 42 year old eventually cannot live *with herself*, because she has become the

⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

⁵ Williams, op. cit., p. 86. As Scheffler points out, this binary need not be exhaustive.

⁶ Scheffler, op. cit., p. 88.

source of the problem. EM decides to throw it in accordingly: she stops taking the elixir, and dies at 342.

Yet as Scheffler demonstrates (and has also been noted by Christopher Belshaw) Williams's argument is not really about *immortality*.⁷ For what if the natural human lifespan was a thousand, or a million, or a billion, years? In those cases humans would not be immortal, and indeed EM would have died comparatively young. The problem for EM is not immortality, just that she's gone on for far too long as it is. Williams's case isn't actually about the tedium of immortality, but about how we need categorical desire in order to possess a life worth living, and so have reasons to think that insofar as we retain constancy of character, after a certain time categorical desire will go away from our lives, because we will run out of things that we find sufficiently absorbing or worth living for.

In fact, we ought to be even more skeptical of Williams's case than Scheffler is. As Belshaw argues, it is a significant and yet questionable assumption that categorical desire *must* go away from a human life.⁸ Certainly, there are kinds of people for whom this will be true – and *perhaps* it would be true for all of us, eventually. But when? The world is a very big place, with an awful lot to see and do. There are more books to read than could be achieved in 20 lifetimes (and many that would bear multiple readings), and the variety of human culture and history is only just short of endless. There is also the point that an immortal (or even just an ultra-long-lived) being would get to see history continuously unfolding, and to a certain bent of mind that would be a most exciting possibility. (Imagine getting to live in the 18th century *and* the 20th.) If one's picture is of living 300 years in (for example) a Cambridge college, then certainly categorical desire might rapidly go away from that. But the answer is then not to be the sort of person who could imagine that as a sensible way to live for a very long time, let alone without end (or rather: hope that one would not be that sort of person, were one to live for a very long time).

It is of course significant that Williams rules out biological ageing as a source of what is undesirable about EM's immortality, in order to isolate the claim that the problem is about *her*, not her body.⁹ But again, this seems too fast. Although one could imagine EM staying *biologically* at age 42 forever, would that also mean staying the exact same *character* as we presently associate with a 42 year old Elina Makropulos? Assume that my body does not change, biologically, in any significant sense between the ages of 30 and 40. In that period my wants and desires and perspectives all develop and change – but it would be too much to say that I cease to have the same *character*, even if it is true that my character has evolved in that period. Similarly, why can we not imagine EM's character as evolving during her endless 42, with EM still recognizably being (to herself and to others) the same

⁷ Ibid., pp. 93–5; Belshaw, op. cit., pp. 329.

⁸ Belshaw, op. cit., pp. 330–2.

⁹ Williams, op. cit. p. 89.

person, albeit one who, like all other persons, changes with time?¹⁰ Her character, because it evolves, may be able to avoid tedium, whilst EM still stays recognizably the same person. Williams seems to rule this out by fiat, insisting that a constant character would run out of categorical desires – but it is not clear how true that is, or whether a genuinely immortal EM would reach that point at the relatively young (for an immortal) age of 342.¹¹

Yet if Williams doesn't get to grips with the question of immortality as opposed to just living too long, Scheffler does. And he provides a powerful set of considerations for why 'death gives the meaning to life', and by implication why it would appear incoherent, or at least confused, for creatures like us to desire immortality, because 'an eternal life would, in a sense, be no life at all'.¹²

As Scheffler points out, our basic understanding of life is of it being temporally bounded, with a birth and death marking each end, and successive stages of development in between. These stages are in part biological, but we attribute enormous cultural, psychological, social, (etc.) importance to them. An immortal life would lack any such shape, and in turn we could not apply to it the structures of understanding that fundamentally shape what it means to live a human life, and in turn appreciate what is of human value. Similarly, illness, harm, physical danger, risk, etc. are a central part of living a life that is structured by human concerns, as well as goals and possibilities. If we were exempt from those things, the character of our deliberations would take on a very different form, and it is not clear that immortal beings would value or strive after anything in the ways that we do. As Williams quotes EM, 'in the end it is the same...singing and silence'.¹³

In turn, Scheffler suggests that we can make little coherent sense of the simplistic idea of immortality as consisting simply of 'living as an embodied person in the world rather as it is...only doing so forever'.¹⁴ Living as an embodied person in the world rather as it is necessarily involves *not* doing so forever. If the response is to imagine beings that are not bound by the facts of biology as we know them, then as Scheffler points out, this is to move towards thinking about creatures that are not recognizably *human* at all. Hence the desire would seem to shift from one of immortality to something else; to wanting to be a (magical?) creature that could not be anything like what we are now.¹⁵ According to Scheffler, immortality would remove the 'circumstances of value' as we understand them, and would deprive us of anything that is recognizably a human life at all.¹⁶ It would seem to follow, therefore, that a desire for immortality must be at the very least confused, if not outright incoherent, because if it was fulfilled it would immediately vitiate what we wanted it *for*.

¹⁰ There lurks here, of course, a more general problem about personal identity over time and whether we can make coherent sense of that. But that is precisely a general problem, one that applies likewise to us, and not specially to EM.

¹¹ Similar points are made in Belshaw, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹² Scheffler, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹³ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁴ Scheffler, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98–99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Scheffler's argument strikes me as to some degree persuasive, insofar as I agree that an endless life wouldn't be a *human* life. But this leaves open the question of whether we might nonetheless reply: and so much the worse for human life. It is not incoherent to desire to live in a radically different way, would that one could, even if one cannot really imagine what that would consist of. (A lot will turn on how dissatisfied one is with one's life now.) To sketch an argument by way of analogy: had I become a professional footballer at 16, instead of starting down the long road that would eventually turn me into a career academic, my life would be radically different, and I would doubtless value many different things, and go about valuing in many different ways. To some degree it is surely true that I cannot *really* imagine what it's like to be a professional footballer in the modern world, such is the bizarreness of that career path, and attendant lifestyle, at least when considered from my current perspective (although of course the difference is nowhere near as dramatic as trying to imagine what it would be like to be an immortal being). But can I really imagine being, say, a sixteenth century samurai? In some ways it seems obvious that I cannot; that what I imagine is only a projection of my own experiences, and that I'll never *really* conceive of what it would be like to live a life like that. But does it follow that it makes no sense to wish that that was indeed my life, say after reading James Clavell's *Shōgun*, and sketching out a corresponding fantasy to myself? It doesn't strike me as incoherent or contradictory to imagine what it would be like to be a professional football player or a sixteenth century samurai, and wish that my life had gone that way rather than the way it has. Being immortal is a more extreme case, certainly, but it seems to sit at the end of a continuum of comprehensible fantasy, rather than being simply incomprehensible when properly unpacked.¹⁷

Of course, this addresses only part of the point. For even if it is possible to coherently imagine being immortal, it's another question as to whether one would *want* to be such a thing. (The example of the samurai is again relevant: one effect of Clavell's novel is to bring home the deeply alien quality of feudal Japan, a world that is in many ways abhorrent to people with modern western sensibilities.) Here Scheffler's argument may have a powerful upshot: beings who lacked temporal and biological bounding might not turn out to be beings that we would want to be anything like. The creatures he imagines sound rather like the Ancient Greek gods, who were of course immortal, but also petty, capricious, nasty, truculent and (if their constant malicious meddling is anything to go by) frequently bored. Would one *want* to be a Greek god? It is not obvious that the answer is yes.

But let us for the sake of argument grant Scheffler's case that immortality, understood in terms of living forever, is something that we can get little coherent grip upon, and that such a life would in any case be no *human* life at all. Let us also make the further suggestion that, as a result, it appears that we cannot

¹⁷ It also seems too quick and unwarranted an assumption on Scheffler's part that immortals would be able to grasp only crude hedonistic pleasures and pains. Why not also, say, the joys of contemplating complex mathematical problems, which on the fact of it do not seem to get their value from the temporally-bounded nature of human existence? (Scheffler, op. cit., p. 97.) For similar arguments against, and doubts about, Scheffler's position, see Belshaw, op. cit. pp. 332–8, and Luca Ferrero 'Agency, Scarcity, and Mortality', *The Journal of Ethics* Vol. 19, No. 3–4, (2015).

coherently desire to be immortal in the sense of never dying. I also wish to accept Scheffler's case that there is nothing irrational or unwarranted in fearing our own deaths, *even though* we know that not only must we eventually die, but that our life as presently constituted depends in part for its shape and value precisely on the fact that one day we will die. What I want to claim below, however is that many further insights about the desire for immortality can be gleaned from works of literature and popular fiction, from authors who have subjected the notion to even light critical pressure. When we examine these, however, we are able to draw interesting further insights into the complexity of what is at issue, and which indicate that a desire for immortality is likely to be about more than simply a desire never to die.

Both Williams and Scheffler make use of wider artistic materials to advance their cases. Williams draws inspiration, and not just his title, from Janáček's opera, whilst Scheffler's earlier chapters regarding the importance of collective human survival make use of P.D. James's novel *The Children of Men* (and, to a lesser extent, the very different film by Alfonso Cuarón), as well as Alvy Singer's character in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. In neither case are these examples window dressing, or mere pumps for intuitions. On the contrary, both Williams and Scheffler appeal to literature and art as a way of getting at aspects of the human condition that risk eluding a purely formal philosophical analysis. In this sense, both treat philosophy as what Williams dubbed a 'humanistic discipline', one that must be 'impure' if it is to accurately and insightfully understand what it purports to examine. As Williams put it:

Sometimes literature or history can be called upon, to give some idea of the weight or substance of ethical concepts that we use or have been used by others; analytic argument, the philosopher's specialty, can certainly play a part in sharpening perception. But the aim is to sharpen perception, to make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling.¹⁸

In humanistic spirit, I want to suggest that if we turn to some popular treatments of immortality, beyond those appealed to by Williams and Scheffler, then we uncover considerable further resources for 'sharpening perception'.

Treatments of immortality – understood simply as *never* dying, of going on *forever* – are relatively commonplace in works of literature. Yet what is remarkable is how often immortality is depicted not as a blessing, but a curse, or what Belshaw has described as 'something very like the traditional hell'.¹⁹ Examples abound, but Tennyson's poem *Tithonus* is one of the most moving. The immortal narrator describes his physiological and psychological decay brought on by an endless life; the attendant loss of grip on personal identity ('I used to watch, if I be he that watch'd'); the pain of living always amongst the comparatively young; of losing forever his loved

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, *Morality, An Introduction to Ethics*, reissued edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. xiv–xv. See also Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A.W. Moore. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); 'Why Philosophy Needs History', in *Essays and Reviews, 1959–2002* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Belshaw, op. cit., p. 326.

ones and having to go on without them, always and increasingly alone. Tennyson explicitly depicts immortality as something from which Tithonus asks ‘release me’, juxtaposing his condition with that of the ‘happy men who have the power to die; and grassy barrows of the happier dead’.²⁰

Or consider the third book of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Whilst island-hopping around what appears to be Indonesia, Gulliver stops off in a kingdom in which a small percentage of the population are born with a black mark on their foreheads, a sure sign that they will live forever. Gulliver initially assumes these ‘Struldbrugs’ to be the happiest of all creatures, and discourses a priori on all the advantages he imagines that they possess. But he soon learns that to be Struldbrug is to be cursed. For these beings never stop ageing, and after about 30 years sink first into insanity and then ever-worsening decrepitude, roaming the kingdom as disgusting brutes shunned by normal humans. Gulliver quickly comes to see his earlier errors, and renounces his happy estimation of the Struldbrug condition.

The idea of immortality as a curse is not confined to what might be called ‘high’ literature, or poetry, but is also a staple of more popular reflections on the subject. (This matters: why should insight into this aspect of the human condition not be relatively commonplace and quotidian?) In the third installment of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, the character Aragorn enlists the help of the Dead Men of Dunharrow in order to overcome his enemies. The Dead Men were placed under a curse by Aragorn’s ancestor Isildur for breaking their word to assist him in battle, and subsequently condemned to live forever under the mountains, or until released by one of Isildur’s heirs. The Dead Men are not really dead, but held in a constant state of trapped immortality – and that is their punishment. In Peter Jackson’s cinematic adaptation, the King of the Dead explicitly demands that Aragorn ‘release’ him and his kin as recompense for their lending assistance in battle. Being unable to die proper – to be released from a life that is no longer worth living – is clearly presented as a curse in both novel and film.

Similarly, Dan Simmons’s science fiction epic *Hyperion* (an intelligent riff on John Keats’s unfinished epic) explores the idea of immortality in the first of his traveler’s tales. Paul Duré, an ethnographer-priest, travels into the deep jungle of the planet Hyperion to make contact with the descendants of the survivors of a long-lost plane wreck. The survivors, known as the Bikura, have become infected with a parasite that renders them immortal. Yet immortality has made them uniform in appearance and mind, removing all of their individuality, and turning them into biological automata. Passing through endless cycles of death and regeneration, the Bikura become like mentally disabled children, unable to grasp the notion of time as a continuum, and losing any meaningful capacity for personal identity. As Duré puts it: ‘There is no doubt that I have discovered the ultimate in stagnant human societies. The Bikura have realized the human dream of immortality and have paid for it with their humanity and their immortal souls’.²¹ Duré himself becomes infected, but

²⁰ Alfred Lord Tennyson, Tithonus’, in *Selected Poems*, ed. C. Ricks, (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 274–6.

²¹ Dan Simmons, *Hyperion*, (London: Orion Books, [2011] 1989), p. 87.

rather than become one of the Bikura, he puts himself through a tortuous cycle of repeated death and resurrection until the pain overwhelms the parasite, which eventually releases him. In short, he would rather die an agonizing series of deaths than be immortal, if being immortal means being that.

These examples indicate that to those who have reflected upon it, the prospect of never dying turns out to be rather undesirable. And such permutations regarding the ways immortality might be bad for us have of course attracted formal philosophical analysis in recent work.²² My point in citing these examples from literature, however, is to show how commonplace they are, and how easily hit upon not just by professional philosophers, but anybody who thinks for a while about the issues in play. (More instances could be cited: the curse of the vampire is standardly taken at least in part to be about immortality.) Certainly, there is significant variation in these accounts regarding *why* living forever would be a bad thing. Nonetheless, Williams's case of EM's constitutional boredom at 342 emerges as only one play on a common theme. I take it that Tennyson's case is essentially the same as Williams's (albeit not rendered in the same technical manner), whilst categorical desire might go away from us not only because we are terminally bored, but because we are hopelessly decrepit, that we are incurably lonely insofar as we are the only immortal, or have been rendered inhuman through cycles of regeneration in a closed environment. In other words: that never dying would not be desirable is a truth, at some level, more or less known already to those who have subjected the notion to much reflection, even if only because the myriad ways in which one could experience never dying generate multiple possibilities for situations in which categorical desire would permanently go away. Scheffler's particular technical treatment of the matter helps to bring clearly into focus exactly what it is about a never-ending life that seems to undermine any pre-reflective desire for such a thing: that if we had it, it would fatally undermine what we wanted it *for*. But although Scheffler helps to make explicit that this might be how things are, I take it that the same lesson is essentially contained in all of the above examples, even if they do not indicate the tight logical necessity of the relationship that Scheffler aims to bring out.

What all of the above examples have in common – and hence what is crucial for present purposes – however is that they take the reader as starting from an unreflective assumption that immortality would be desirable, before debunking that assumption by subjecting it to critical interrogation via a spelling out of what immortality would (allegedly) actually end up involving. In doing so, they point us towards two subsequent questions. First, why is the uncritical, or pre-reflective, assumption that immortality would be a blessing rather than a curse (taken to be) the widespread and default one, such that these myriad authors seek to expose it as in fact confused or faulty? (Why do we need to be told what these authors are trying to tell us, rather than automatically seeing it for ourselves?) Second, if the undesirability of immortality is revealed relatively quickly following the application of light critical pressure, why does this particular fantasy nonetheless recur throughout many works of popular imagination, and (I take it) across many cultures, being repeatedly mined for

²² See Burely, *op. cit.*; Belshaw, *op. cit.*

artistic usage? If so easily debunked, whence the staying power of a pre-reflective desire to be immortal?

Part of the answer, I suggest, lies in the fact that when it comes to immortality the relevant possibilities are not exhausted by a binary opposition between being mortal creatures as we are now, and being immortal creatures who *never* die, who are somehow *incapable* of dying (perhaps unless released by some *deus ex machina*) and from whom, upon reflection, we recoil. In turn this indicates that insofar as we may find ourselves with a desire for immortality, that desire is not exhausted by the notion of going on forever (*pace* various caveats to make ‘forever’ more or less pleasant or even just comprehensible). Accordingly, another notion worth paying particular attention to, insofar as it can deepen our understanding of what may be in play, is presented in the epic Indian poem *Mahabharata*.

In that tale, the great warrior Bhishma is early in life granted the boon of ‘death upon desire’. Bhishma cannot die until he wills it – but that does not preclude him from later falling in battle at the hands of Arjuna, and finding himself incapacitated on a bed of arrows. Still, even when so incapacitated, Bhishma is not yet ready to die; he elects first to lie on the field of battle and pass on his wisdom to Yudhishtira, until he has decided that his time has come to depart. Bhishma prepares himself for death, and when he is ready, draws his life to a close.²³

This capacity for death upon desire is presented in *Mahabharata* explicitly as a boon, and the important contrast with immortality as never dying is clear. Had Bhishma been impaled on the bed of arrows whilst immortal – in the sense of never dying, of being somehow *unable* to die, and hence presumably staying there forever – he would have labored under a curse. As it is, things were otherwise. Yet Bhishma’s boon seems coherent and comprehensible as something we might want for ourselves.²⁴ This in turn suggests that a more reflective take on immortality is possible, one that extends beyond the primitive, or pre-reflective, idea of simply going on forever, which many literary explorations already give us good reason to suspect would be a very bad thing. That is, we can conceive of immortality as having the power to decide *when* we will die; of it being something that is up to us, dependent on nobody or nothing but ourselves. And the desire for immortality understood in this more reflective sense transpires to be interestingly complex, and revealing of some of our likewise complex attitudes to the fact of death itself.

The more reflective notion of immortality as control over one’s own death is not vulnerable to the sorts of concerns raised by Williams with regard to immortality understood simply as going on forever (or even just a very long time). For if one had Bhishma’s boon, one could opt to go on living only as long as one was satisfied that one had enough categorical desires to make it worth doing so. When those ran out

²³ Again, such a possibility (and similar variants) has of course been noted in the philosophical literature, e.g. Belshaw op. cit. pp. 325–6; Burley op. cit. pp. 309–10; Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*, (London: Biteback, 2013), p. 286; Hunter Steele ‘Could Body-bound Immortality be Liveable?’, *Mind* Vol. 86, No. 339, (1976), pp. 426–7; John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, ‘Immortality and Boredom’, *Journal of Ethics* Vol. 18, No. 4, (2014), pp. 353–72.

²⁴ As Belshaw puts it (op. cit., p. 341), ‘Is a life where death is within your control, and can always be delayed better than one where it is not? Many will suppose it is.’

(but not before) one would, like EM, call it a day. Indeed, it is notable that Williams does not much consider all of the *advantages* that EM enjoyed for her 300 years at 42: in particular, continuing securely in the knowledge that she would be able to go on for as long as *she* wanted, without someone or something intervening to cut her plans short.

Regarding Scheffler's case that we cannot coherently desire to be immortal, things are less clear. On the one hand, it might seem as if one could possess Bhishma's boon whilst recognising that one will eventually need to call it quits in order to go on being able to have access to Scheffler's 'circumstances of value' that define distinctively human life. The point is simply that one would only call it quits when one is ready.²⁵ However, part of Scheffler's case is that human values are constructed in reference to the fixed fact of death, and the processes of prior biological ageing, which are (within certain fairly uniform, if to some degree indeterminate, parameters) shared by all humans. If one were possessed of Bhishma's boon, then one would no longer live one's life via the stages of human ageing and eventual decay and death that structure the 'circumstances of value', in whatever local cultural settings they happen to be found. Gaining access to Bhishma's boon would thus probably mean having to accept that the resulting life would be very different to the one that we presently live: we would not simply be able to transmit our old lives forward indefinitely, without substantive change. Nonetheless, the point still stands that even if it is true that because death gives the meaning to our lives, and in turn we could not sanely or coherently desire to live *forever*, it does not therefore follow that we cannot sanely and coherently desire to live a lot longer than we presently have the prospect of doing – which is precisely one of the things that Bhishma's boon promises. There is, after all, a big difference between 73 and 342, or even 73 and 103 (assuming, in the latter case if not the former, typical rates of human bodily decline). And whilst we would probably have to accept that were we to possess Bhishma's boon, we would have to give up on what are at present distinctively human values, the question opens as to whether we might think that a price worth paying, whilst looking forward to developing new kinds of values befitting the lives of creatures who have the power to choose death upon desire.

Interestingly, the more reflective notion of immortality as control over one's death in turn seems to help to make greater sense of our attitudes towards the prospect of our own deaths, and in particular such attitudes extend beyond only fear at our ceasing to be. In this regard it is helpful to revisit a passage from Miguel de Unamuno that both Williams and Scheffler cite, but do not fully appreciate the import of:

I am presented with arguments...to prove the absurdity of a belief in the immortality of the soul. But these ratiocinations do not move me, for they are reasons and no more than reasons, and one does not feed the heart with reasons. I do not want to die. No! I do not want to die, and I do not want to want to die. I want to live always, forever and ever. And *I* want to live, this poor I which I am, the I which I feel myself to be here and now, and for that reason I am tormented by the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 325–6.

I am the centre of my Universe, the centre of my Universe, and in my extreme anguish I cry, along with Michelet, ‘My I! They are stealing my I!’.²⁶

It is important not to pay too much attention to the precise wording here. Scheffler, and Tennyson, and all the rest, give us good reason to think that even if, in this precise moment, Unamuno thinks that he wants to live forever and ever, there are many conceivable points at which that would cease to be true, or that if it were true, it would be so only because Unamuno would have ceased to be recognizably himself (and hence his living forever would not get him what *he* wants). Nonetheless, what we ought to notice here is the guttural cry that underlies the passage. This notably takes the form of outrage that something is being unfairly taken away (‘They are stealing my I!’). Unamuno is afraid to die, but he is also *angry* that he will do so, even outraged by it, and he apparently experiences this as a violation and removal of what rightfully belongs to him. If this is so – and it seems a common enough, and understandable, response to the prospect of one’s own death – the question of what the desire for immortality may encompass opens up.

I agree with Scheffler that there is nothing irrational in fearing our own deaths. Part of that fear comes, as Thomas Nagel has famously argued, from the idea that we are going to be deprived of something.²⁷ (Nagel 1979). Furthermore, we seem also to fear death from a sort of horror at imagining what it will be like to *be* dead, as Scheffler suggests, and Adam Smith supplies a possible explanation regarding.²⁸ (Even if the thought of what it will be like to be dead turns out to be incoherent, that does not stop many from having it, and of it generating fear.) And of course, we fear death because it will frustrate the categorical desires we are presently possessed of. I agree with Scheffler that the prospects of fighting the fear of death with metaphysical arguments are poor indeed (‘one does not feed the heart with reasons’). Yet – and as Unamuno helps us to see – for many people the prospect of death generates not just fear, but *anger*. This anger seems to be a sense that one does not want to die because, on the one hand (and in the Hollywood movie cliché) one ‘still has so much left to give’. But it is also that one wants to be the one who finally decides when it is time to call it a day. Death does not just deprive us of our lives, and thereby frustrate our categorical desires, it is also the ultimate affront (excepting the case of the suicide) to our own agency. It is thus perhaps not surprising that in many cultures death is anthropomorphized in popular depictions, a specific figure that comes in corporeal form (for westerns, The Grim Reaper). Death strikes many as a personalized assault, a theft of what rightfully belongs to us: the capacity to decide who and what we will be. Confronting death is about more than just fear. It is also about agency.

²⁶ Miguel de Unamuno, ‘The Hunger for Immortality’, in *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. A. Kerrigan, ed. M. Nozick and A. Kerrigan, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 51.

²⁷ Thomas Nagel, ‘Death’, in *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

²⁸ Scheffler, op. cit. p. 102. Smith suggests that we fear the idea of being dead because of our tendency to imagine ourselves into the situation of the dead, and consider how they would feel if they were still capable of feeling – and we recoil in horror at the thought of being left alone in the cold, wet, worm-filled ground: see, Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 12–13.

There is great significance in the old myth that the Grim Reaper can be denied his prize, if one first beats him at chess.

A desire for immortality may therefore consist of things other than simply a desire to live forever. For if we could choose and control the time of our own deaths, we would be able to preserve what seems to many (perhaps to all of us under healthy and free conditions) of the utmost importance: being in charge of our own lives, for as long as we want to continue those same lives, and stopping only when *oneself* is finally ready to do so.

But if this is so, a more reflective understanding of immortality, and the desire to have it, need not stop at the question of when we will die. For it naturally extends to questions of how we will die, also. If life becomes unbearably awful, or ceases to be recognizably human at all, most people would not want *that*, and indeed many would choose to cease going on. (We don't need to go to literature or philosophy for proof: the assisted suicides of terminally ill patients in places such as Switzerland and Belgium show that for some death is better than continuing to live.) But for those not in such circumstances death is an affront, and it does not just induce fear, but anger, outrage, and a sense of agential violation. Yet these responses may be generated not only by the belief that death will come too soon, but that it often comes in ways that we very much wish to avoid. Not only do most of us not wish to die 'before our time', we wish also to avoid dying because of some stupid piece of bad luck, or some debilitating and degrading disease, or the malicious activities of our enemies, or the indifference of superior powers (etc.). Even if we accept that we must one day die in order for our lives to have meaning, who wants to die alone and in pain in a lonely hospital ward, or because the hay bale fell at that precise moment? In the science fiction movie *The Matrix*, the character Switch is murdered by the treacherous Cypher, who kills her by unplugging her body in the real world whilst she is immersed in the computer-generated matrix. Revealingly, Switch's final words to her comrades are 'Not like this...not like this...'.

Yet insofar as we object to dying before our time, and in ways that we take to be unbefitting or objectionable, this may explain some of the original motivation for the primitive, pre-reflective desire for immortality as simply never dying. After all, if we were guaranteed to live *forever*, that would entail not being vulnerable to the sorts of affronts associated with death. Hence, the primitive desire for immortality may itself have been more complex than it initially seemed: not only about extending this life forever, but also about escaping the aspects of death that relate not just to the frustration of our categorical desires, but to the *way* in which those desires are frustrated, frequently before we are ready, and are also perceived as an assault upon our agency. However, a desire to not be so vulnerable to the myriad objectionable features of death is itself unaffected by subsequent realisation that the primitive notion of immortality as living forever is itself undesirable, or even incoherent. Rather, the desire to avoid the affronts of death gets a fitting expression in the reconfiguration of the desire for immortality as controlling how and when we die – and indeed, seems to underpin why that more reflective notion itself appears attractive. The more reflective notion is, of course, a fantasy, as all notions of immortality must be. But it contains a lot, and preserves something that now appears to have been there even in the primitive conception: a desire that our lives be placed beyond *luck*.

That is, to escape some of the worst and most potentially devastating vagaries of fortune, and to experience our agency as somehow all-encompassing, as subject to no control except its own. If that is indeed so, it is hardly surprising that immortality has long been associated with the divine.

Interestingly, however, the notion may now start to break down in a different way. For will it really be enough, once we go down this line of thought, to say that the desire for immortality understood as controlling one's death is nonetheless indifferent to the circumstances one finds oneself in? After all, I would presumably want to be able to exercise this capacity in circumstances that are maximally favourable. To call it a day when, and only when, I had run out of categorical desires, but not (for example) because some personal catastrophe rendered my options a brute binary choice between dying now, or living forever paralyzed and blind in a hospital bed. Recall Bhishma on the bed of arrows: the boon of death upon desire was favourable when compared to being simply mortal. But would he not have preferred to not be put in the situation where he was incapacitated by Arjuna in the first place, thus before being forced to choose his own death as the least-worst option given the outcome of the power politics that led him to that point? Does the desire for immortality as control over one's death slide inexorably into a desire for *omnipotence*?

If so, Scheffler's argument may return with force: an omnipotent life is certainly no human life, and the 'circumstances of value' that give our human lives meaning would be lost were we omnipotent beings. But whether Scheffler's argument does so return will depend on whether or not we can find a stable resting place between desiring that we can control our own time and manner of death, and desiring that we could control everything. It does not seem, at least on the face of it, implausible that we could separate these things. This is not least because, compared to the lives that we actually have, being immortal in the sense of controlling our own death would appear to be a considerable improvement. We could want that whilst stopping short of wanting to be God, not least because what we presumably want is precisely (to quote Scheffler again) 'that some version of the lives we are now leading could continue', if not without end, then at least for as long as we choose. What we would want would indeed be precisely a life that was 'an improved version, perhaps, but a recognizable version nonetheless'. Being God is not an improved version of any human life, so it seems coherent to want to stop short of that, even whilst desiring that our lives were less vulnerable to the affront of death than they in fact are.

There is a danger of over-emphasis here. For whilst I take it that many – particularly those raised in individualistic western cultures, used to conceiving of ourselves as autonomous rights-bearers, atheistic captains of our own ships – can recognise the appeal of immortality in terms of a promise of final control and ultimate agency, there is also an important contrasting set of concerns. Namely, that in less propitious or happy circumstances life can be a burden, and agency experienced as an exhausting source of anxiety, frustration, or difficulty. Although it may often be true of many of us that we deeply desire to control our own destiny, including especially the extent to which we will even go on existing, there are also times when one can wish that the demands of being the choice-maker were (at least temporarily) removed or lessened. Such desires can exist whilst falling a long way short of the extremis of the motivations of the suicide, and they perhaps indicate that many, and maybe all of us, oscillate

between a desire for more agency (experienced most especially during the good times), and a darker wish that we be released from the burdens of having to captain the ship.

Nonetheless, if it is indeed the case that fantasies of immortality appeal to many at least in part because of what they suggest with regards to our capacities for agency, then the position we find ourselves in may not be as 'strange and unsettling' as Scheffler claims. I agree that it is neither irrational nor unwarranted to fear one's own death, and yet that at the same time we should recognise that the fact of our eventual death gives the meaning to our lives. This ceases to be a puzzling combination of attitudes, however, when we realize that part of what troubles us deeply about our own death is the prospect of it coming at a time, or in a manner, or both, that is well before our categorical desires have gone away, and is simultaneously a deep affront to our sense of agency. Whilst death may indeed be necessary for our lives to have meaning, it is nonetheless still an affront, as well as a source of fear, precisely because it comes (or threatens to come) at times and in ways that we do not (yet) want. The fact that death has to come *eventually* for my life to have meaning does not mean that there is anything strange and unsettling in my fear (and anger, and outrage, and so on) of it coming *now*, or any time before *I* am ready. The fantasy of being in control with regards to deciding exactly when I am ready – the fantasy of Bhishma's boon – helps to bring this out, and suggests that our attitudes hang together more happily than Scheffler worries.

Similarly, Ronald Dworkin's suggestion that the 'intense visceral appeal' of notions of immortality is 'entirely negative' seems incorrect. It is true that one thing that those of us with remaining categorical desires exhibit is a desire to avoid 'the total, obliterating, itself unimaginable, snuffing out of everything'.²⁹ But beyond simply a desire to negate that eventuality, there may also be the positive aspiration to be the one who decides when and how to keep going, until one is ready to stop. The desire not to be at the mercy of luck, and hence all of the ugly, premature, painful, or just plain stupid, modes of exit that luck may generate. To be, finally, in control. This is certainly an unattainable desire, and it may not be the only or always dominant desire, but it is nonetheless not simply a negative response to the prospect of annihilation. All but the luckiest (if that can possibly be the right word given the point that their lives will have to have come to) will find that death arrives before categorical desire has gone away. We can thus agree with Williams that death 'Necessarily...tends to be too early or too late'. And whilst we can also agree with him that it 'is possible to be...lucky in having the chance to die', it also seems that very few of us will indeed have such luck.³⁰ This may finally be a tragic situation, but it need not be puzzling when we recognise that our responses to the prospect of death extend beyond the simple fear of our ceasing to be. As with so much in life, death turns out to be more complicated than that.

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²⁹ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press: 2013), p. 150.

³⁰ Williams, 'Makropulos Case', p. 100.